



Practical Politics and Voice and Equality

Citation

Hochschild, Jennifer. 1997. Practical politics and voice and equality. Review of Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics, by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry E. Brady. American Political Science Review 91, no. 2: 425-427.

Published Version

<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2952368>

Permanent link

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both to reconstruction for post-hoc plausibility and to inflation for social desirability, but they point out that the response patterns vary by forms of participation in ways which make it unlikely that social desirability accounts for the entire phenomenon. They also forgo describing civic motivations as “expressive,” probably having picked up from the philosophical literature the point that motivations deriving from duty are conceptually distinct from, even opposed to, motivations deriving from desire.

Practical Politics and *Voice and Equality*

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This is a difficult book to review for at least two reasons. The first is its excellence. It is simply hard to find much to criticize, and it is almost impossible to find a flaw really worth sinking one's teeth into. No sooner did I discover a weak spot than it was dealt with sensibly and usually persuasively. Is the model in danger of treating correlation as causation, or of assuming that the causal arrow runs in one direction rather than the other? VSB use two distinct statistical techniques (OLS regression and two-stage least-squares) on the same issues to deal with the latter problem, and they explain why correlation suffices for their purposes to address the former. Does the question about abortion on their survey create more polarization than “actually” exists in the public, at least according to other surveys? Yes, they report, it probably does, but that potential flaw makes possible a fascinating discussion of the effect of intense, single-issue politics. Should political scientists focus on the role of institutions rather than on traditional behavioral variables? VSB report a simple, neat, and effective way to distinguish variation across individuals from variation across institutional contexts. And so on; this book shows over and over the salutary effects of smart people working very hard for a long time on a difficult problem. VSB have produced a set of results and an argument that are subtle, powerful, significant, and persuasive.

Voice and Equality also is hard to review because its mode of presentation is that of sweet reasonableness. Footnotes bend over backward to show why apparent differences between the findings in this book and others are not really disagreements, or are most likely due to alternative choice of methods. VSB carefully report points at which their own results are tentative, or follow their analysis of the deep problems of democratic participation with a discussion of its sometimes surprising virtues. Even when they devastatingly demonstrate the shortcomings of others' analyses—pointing out, for example, how wrong it is to generalize about “political participation” from voting studies—they do so in a way that invites those others to join their new exploration rather than retreat into truculent defense. So, although this book provides an array of

In the adversarial model of democracy, the relevant normative rule is that conflicting interests should be represented in proportion to the numbers of interest-bearers in the population. VSB advance both normative theory and empirical knowledge in this tradition by considering in depth for the first time the role of citizen as representative, and by demonstrating to devastating effect that both descriptively and substantively the existing participatory system in the United States results in major representational distortions.

findings that shake up much of what we thought we knew about political participation, it does not do so in a way that makes it easy, or even appropriate, to mount a vehement critique.

So what is a poor reviewer to do? In my case, I will compare the arguments in *Voice and Equality* to arguments elsewhere in an effort either to create some useful controversy or to draw out more sharply than do VSB some of the startling implications of their analysis.

Consider, to begin with, the book's discussion of the relationship between the views of politically inactive citizens and activists. Various analysts (Skerry 1993, Lichter 1985, Mansbridge 1986) have argued that leaders, at least of identity-based groups, are even more liberal than are their liberal followers. Yet, VSB find that, although 28% of the poor hold liberal attitudes on economic issues, only 21% of poor activists do (p. 215). Among African Americans, although 22% strongly favor government help for blacks, only 17% of activists hold the same view; among Latinos, even more (24%) favor government help for Latinos, but fewer than half that many activists (11%) concur (p. 240). (The latter two findings may be partly explained by the fact that activists are less likely to receive means-tested benefits and have higher incomes than nonactivists of their own race or ethnicity. The results hold for Latinos, however, even when those of Cuban origin are excluded from the analysis [p. 241].) Thus, “the participatory representation of African-Americans and Latinos is diminished in two ways: they are less likely to be active, and group activists are less likely to represent the distinctive policy positions and needs of the group” (p. 241).

These are explosive results. They imply a (growing?) class disparity within the black and Latino communities and perhaps the conservatism of the would-be upwardly mobile within the community of the poor. They also imply, although it is never stated, that previous research is wrong or at best is right about an unrepresentative group of activists. More generally, these results reinforce *Voice and Equality's* broadest argument, that conservatives (and the wealthy, but that is a separate point) exercise a voice disproportionate to their share of the U.S. population.

Another set of findings also challenges what we thought we knew about identity-based politics. Broadly speaking, after controlling for various personal and institutional resources and capacities, race and ethnicity play no role—and gender and parental class play only a small role—in determining whether Americans are politically active. This is not to say, as VSB point out, that people of different races, genders, or classes participate at the same level. Indeed, quite the contrary. It is to say that ascriptive traits matter only indirectly, by determining citizens' education, family income, political information and interest, and other factors that do directly determine participation (pp. 440–2). In short, identity per se is irrelevant to political activism.

More pointedly, VSB tried hard to find effects of group consciousness on levels of political activity or engagement but without result; there simply was no relationship between political participation and racial or ethnic identity among African Americans and Latinos. In typical fashion, VSB find this “puzzling” outcome “consistent with recent scholarship on the political behavior of African-Americans” (pp. 355–6). It may well accord with the research that *Voice and Equality* cites, but it seems at odds with the rise in nationalism among (especially affluent) African Americans reported in recent surveys and demonstrated in such acts as the Million Man March and skepticism among blacks of Colin Powell as too attuned to white interests (Dawson 1994a, 1994b; Morris 1996; Hochschild 1995). Have identity politics sharpened and hardened in the half-decade since VSB conducted their survey? Did the civility and smoothness so evident in *Voice and Equality* itself rub off onto the survey that provides its evidence, so that blacks who in some circumstances might be vehemently nationalist were here sweetly reasonable? We do not know, and the discrepancy remains as important as it is “puzzling.”

If we step back from questions about how and why particular groups of Americans participate to look at broad patterns of activism, other issues arise. VSB offer helpful observations on the question of whether so many Americans abstain from politics out of ignorance, fear of reprisal, complacency, alienation, or lack of opportunity. Their answer is, roughly, all of the above, with the probable exception of fear, for which they found almost no evidence.

As always, their discussion is sensible and well backed by careful data analysis. It was in this facet of the book, however, that I felt the greatest frustration about VSB's single-minded focus on survey results as their evidentiary base. For example, research using focus groups (Conover, Leonard, and Searing 1993; Conover 1996) does a much better job of showing Americans' robust sense of rights and anemic sense of civic responsibilities than do VSB. How are we to reconcile *Voice and Equality*'s report that many Americans find great gratification in political activism with the (Conover et al. 1993) finding that, for most respondents, “‘I don't have to work for the community to maintain my respect’”? And how are we to reconcile

VSB's conclusion that few Americans fear to participate with intensive interviews in which even a vigorous and self-confident respondent continually censored herself out of concern that “‘I'm saying too much that I'm not supposed to be saying’” (Hochschild 1981)?

An easy answer is that the qualitative findings I am quoting simply exemplify the fact that a statistical generalization always has exceptions. Most citizens include political activism in their *amour propre*, even if the members of a particular focus group denigrate it; most citizens do not fear to participate, even if a few do. But that answer elides the possibility that even the best survey is much better at recording why people do things that they are proud of and can explain easily than at probing why people shrink in fear or laziness or simply operate in a miasma of slightly embarrassed uncertainty. Surveyors do worry about responses based on social desirability and are beginning to probe what lies behind responses of “don't know” or “no answer”. But the imbalance between what surveys can and cannot reveal may be an insoluble substantive problem, not a matter of better question wording or more sophisticated statistical techniques. Perhaps, in the end, a survey is simply an insufficient instrument for answering VSB's basic question of “why people do *not* take part in politics” (p. 15, emphasis in original).

One of the most fascinating threads running through *Voice and Equality* is the distinction between voting and other forms of political participation. VSB show that voting is more equally distributed and conveys less substantive information to policymakers than do all other forms of political activity. Voters are motivated by different concerns and driven by a different set of resources and capacities than are other activists. They are recruited differently. In short, “on every dimension along which we consider participatory acts, voting is *sui generis*” (p. 24).

I have no criticisms of how VSB demonstrated and explained this distinction, and I applaud their insistence that voting neither stands in for other forms of activism analytically nor matters to the exclusion of other forms of activism substantively. My concern is that they get so carried away by the importance of their message about the uniqueness of voting as a form of political participation that they lose track of its centrality as a political act. After all, some lavishly funded candidates or referenda lose at the ballot box, and some candidates win elections simply because they appeal to more voters than do their opponents. Yet, fewer than half the eligible citizens vote, and the more effect their vote could have (that is, in local rather than state or national elections), the less their inclination to go to the polls. Just as seriously, the proportion of poorly educated adults who vote has declined over the past three decades (Farley 1992), and “the percentage of blacks who . . . cast ballots was greater in the Goldwater-Johnson election of 1964 . . . than in the Dukakis-Bush contest of 1988” (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). The proportion of adults with school-aged children is declining as a share of voters, and parents of color with children in inner-city public schools do not cast anywhere near their potential share of votes in

urban elections—and this in an era when schools are financed by local and state taxing decisions, and educational outcomes matter more for life chances than ever before. In the end, these great and perhaps growing discrepancies between voters and nonvoters may matter more than all the discrepancies between political activists and nonactivists that *Voice and Equality* analyzes so well. VSB do point out that “voting is . . . , in a profound sense, the most basic citizen act” (p. 9). But the thrust of their argument is that, luckily, it is *more* equally distributed than all other forms of political activism. And the energy in their analysis lies in their dissection of all those other forms and the inequalities therein. From the perspective of intellectual exploration, that is the correct focus for their energy; from the perspective of democratic politics, it may not be.

That brings me to my, and the book's, central point: “The public's voice is often loud, sometimes clear, but rarely [on the basis of their evidence, I would say “never”] equal” (p. 509). Monetary contributions to campaigns lie at the opposite end of several continua from voting. They are by far the least equally distributed form of political activity, and they are often accompanied by very informative and urgent (that is, loud and clear) messages to policymakers. Unlike other forms of political activism, all it takes to make a campaign contribution is a lot of money—but a high income is, unfortunately, necessary as well as sufficient. Since the affluent give most of the money and are more conservative than the rest of the population, conservative views dominate within and even distort the arena of citizens' political participation. This is the best brief for campaign finance reform that I have read, although

VSB refrain from drawing any policy implication from their analysis.

Here, finally, is where VSB brilliantly illuminate one of the great ironies of U.S. politics. The only force that has any hope of offsetting the ability of the (conservative) rich to dominate political activity through the use of their money is the skills that the poor develop through participation in organized religious activities. As VSB point out too often, once one learns how to manage a church rummage sale, one can use those skills to manage a school board candidacy. In short, David's church-based political capacity can sometimes win out over Goliath's income-based political resources. But in the end, from a substantive policy perspective, there turns out to be no real contest between David and Goliath because church-goers are just as conservative as the affluent. Thus, campaign contributions (from the rich) distort in a conservative direction the relationship between citizens' underlying economic attitudes and the expression of economic attitudes in the political arena, but so do the political skills developed through church attendance (by the poor). Similarly, Latino church-goers distort the transmission of Latinos' views about government assistance in a conservative direction almost as much as do wealthy Latino contributors. Although it does not do so explicitly, *Voice and Equality* concludes with a slightly new answer to the old question “why is there no socialism in the United States?” Because both poor and wealthy citizens who are unusually active in politics do not want it, even if the rest of the population—rich, poor, and in between, but politically inert—may.

Reply to Reviews

SIDNEY VERBA, KAY L. SCHLOZMAN, and HENRY E. BRADY

Your shiny, priceless book, upon this date,
Goes forth to meet its anti-climactic fate. . . .
The worst reviews of all are those that sigh,
“Another book is here. Hello. Bye-bye.”

—John Updike¹

We appreciate that this review symposium has saved us from the anticlimactic “Hello. Bye-Bye” that all authors fear. We are grateful for the words of appreciation, for thoughtful critiques from several perspectives, and for the opportunity to think once again about a subject to which we have given thought for more years than we care to count.

Each of these reviews treats several aspects of *Voice and Equality*, and each approaches our book from a different point of view. John Aldrich focuses on our attempt to develop a theory to explain citizen participation. Jane Mansbridge emphasizes the relationship of our work to an understanding of how things should

work in a democracy. And Jennifer Hochschild considers our argument in terms of how things do work in American politics. Since we had hoped that our work would have something to say about all three—citizen behavior, politics in a democracy, and politics in America—we are delighted to see this triad of concerns represented in the reviews. Interestingly, all three reviews make clear the limitations on what we can learn about participation by using sample surveys. On the basis of survey data we were able to extend significantly our understanding of the roots of political participation. Nonetheless, each of the reviewers makes a compelling case that limitations of our data, in fact of any survey data, leave significant gaps in that understanding.

Aldrich frames his review in terms of the way that the decision to become active is understood and explained. As he notes, we focus primarily on the decision of whether or not to participate and give less attention to choices about the “direction” of participation. He draws a contrast between our intellectual

¹ *Boston Globe*, April 19, 1985, Reprinted by permission of the author.